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Girls' Secondary Education in the Western World: From the 18th to the 20th Century (Book Review)

Christopher Bischof

University of Richmond, cbischof@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/history-faculty-publications>Part of the [European History Commons](#)

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James C. Albisetti, Joyce Goodman, Rebecca Rogers, eds. *Girls' Secondary Education in the Western World: From the 18th to the 20th Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xii + 223 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-61946-3.

Reviewed by Christopher Bischof (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey)

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Between Change and Tradition: Girls' Secondary Schooling in Modern Europe

This edited collection traces the development of girls' secondary education over three centuries in a way that highlights national peculiarities without losing sight of ideas and debates that cut across borders. Contributors follow very similar formats, exploring historiography and key themes: religion, coeducation, the ideal of domestic motherhood, and politics. The greatest single overarching theme is what the editors describe as "the dialectic between education as a conservative force and as a force for change as expressed in both democratic and authoritarian political agendas across Europe" (p. 2). Political battleground that it was, however, there emerges from the essays as a whole a sense of girls' secondary education as changing gradually and owing perhaps more to social, economic, and cultural causes than high political ones.

Across Europe elementary schools and girls' secondary schools expanded together. Given the cultural weight of the ideal of domestic motherhood, elementary school teaching was a respectable occupation for women in both Protestant and Roman Catholic European nations. The expansion of elementary education for both boys and girls throughout much of Europe in the early nineteenth century fueled a demand for teachers that led to the proliferation of training colleges for women. The essays in this volume describe the rise of training colleges that offered post-primary education to girls and that served as models for other secondary schools. As Simonetta Soldani describes in her essay on Italy, pupil and parental demand for girls' secondary schools often manifested most visibly in the form of girls who attended training colleges with no intention of becoming teachers.

In Italy, and elsewhere in Europe, training colleges came into being alongside a relatively small, preexisting system of secondary education available through governesses, boarding schools, and religious schools. Rebecca Rogers points out in her essay on France that too little is known about private girls' schools, particularly in the eighteenth century. Yet, together with training colleges, private girls' schools provided the seed from which a larger public system of secondary schooling eventually would spring. Eliane Gubin's essay on Belgium explores the expansion of public girls' secondary education there in terms of the efforts of liberals to wrest women from the sway of Roman Catholicism. As she points out, however, "most liberals paid short shrift to the idea of individual self-development and even less to that of the equality between the sexes. Their goal was to rid girls' education of its central focus on the catechism" (p. 122). Yet secondary education did promote individual self-development and later helped to foster the intellectual skills and interpersonal networks that so strengthened feminist movements.

Through examples in contexts across Europe this volume portrays the expansion of opportunities for girls' secondary schooling less as a steady march of progress toward gender equality than as a series of ad hoc reactions motivated by religious antagonisms, bureaucratic necessity (e.g., the need for more elementary school teachers), and economic self-interest. In a much needed synthetic essay on Spanish girls' secondary education, Consuelo Flecha shows that both lay and religious groups stepped in to fill the void left in nineteenth-century Spain when a "public commitment to education" met a financially hard-pressed state (p. 79). Voluntary organiza-

tions, like the Asociación para la Enseñanza de la Mujer (Association for the Teaching of Women), helped to promote the creation of secondary schools offering both a vocational and liberal arts education. Spanish girls also won limited access to the previously all-male Institutos in 1870 in the face of extreme hesitance on the part of male administrators who thought coeducation caused serious “inconveniences” (p. 82). Despite policies aimed at pushing women into the home, even the Franco regime could not stem the tide of an increasingly intellectually serious system of girls’ secondary education. Though coeducation was banned from 1936 to 1970, the ideal of a mother equipped to raise children for a rapidly modernizing society prevented too much backsliding in opportunities for secondary education, even as the ideology it promoted became more conservative. The reasons for the growth and perpetuation of girls’ secondary education were, this collection demonstrates, as ad hoc and ideologically diverse in other European countries as they were in Spain.

Though valuable for its summaries of foreign-language historiographies, this volume’s greatest merit lies in placing side by side the causes, consequences, and factual milestones of the growth of girls’ secondary schooling in European countries ranging from Scandi-

navia and Belgium to Bulgaria and Russia. Historians will find this volume an invaluable reference in their teaching as well as a starting point for thinking comparatively in their research. Two essays on transnational educational influences and movements—James C. Albisetti on the U.S. model’s influence in Europe and Joyce Goodman and Rebecca Rogers on “Crossing Borders”—close the book. Goodman and Rogers’s essay explores the movement of ordinary teachers, lay missionaries, and nuns as they moved across Europe as well as to its colonies—an important corrective to the short shrift the theme of geographic mobility gets in most of the other contributions. They find that in many ways the opportunities these women opened up were both products of and made possible further feminist and other social justice movements. However, they also warn that teachers such as those twentieth-century women “who participated in international conferences expressed opinions about girls’ secondary education that cannot be categorized easily as ‘progressive,’ ‘feminist,’ or ‘egalitarian’” (p. 199). The contributions to this timely volume capture the diversity of attitudes toward girls’ secondary education across Europe in a way that offers an accessible reference and entry point for historians interested in engaging with the secondary education outside their regional area of expertise.

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